Illustrations

Looking up after confirming
my course of travel, I froze.
A hooded figure, illuminated by
the flickering flame, was—
Beast Mercenary
A half-man, half beast who dreams of becoming a human.
"Hey, stop helpin' yerself to mah soup!"

Without thinking, I looked at Zero's lips.
If I touched hers with mine, it would
undoubtedly be sacrilege.
Albus
A young magician who is said
to know the whereabouts of
"The Book of Zero".
"Kiss? Why all this fixation on the lips? Is it a custom?
...Do you want to try it with me, mercenary?"
Zero
A witch journeying in search for "The Book of Zero",
unversed in the ways of the world.

Zero raised her arms and yelled sonorously.
Her voice was terrifyingly loud;
so deep and substantial, it felt as if I was about to be crushed.
"O king of demons,
leave this sacrifice's body
and listen to me!"

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Volume 1 — Prologue

While dusk dyed the world red, something was burning.

As if it were a watchfire, the searing blaze spawned a suffocating column of smoke that pierced the heavens.

The smell of burning flesh.

The words of a prayer being read.

The clanging of a church bell.

The cheering of the crowd rang around the square, with the flame that burned away evil in the center.

From the front of the crowd, I watched the burning witch. While I was cheering at the sight of her sobbing and writhing figure…

“The river overflowed from unbelievably heavy rain. The flood killed many people and washed half the fields away. I hear it’s all that witch’s fault.”

The voices spread from the center of the crowd, from one agreeing, “scary, huh…” to a shrill voice yelling “give my family back, you murderer!” A stone flew through the air, just barely striking the squirming witch.

“It really is scary, huh… I’ve heard about witches only in gossip lately, but one was actually this close… where the heck was she hiding…? She kidnapped babies to use as sacrifices, right? I heard there was a mountain of corpses in her hideout.”

“It’s the Knights of the Church who found the witch’s lair, you know. They usually look like they’re just lounging around, but when it really matters, you can definitely depend on the Church for help. Only god can stop the witches’ demons.”

At last, the struggling, writhing, and screaming witch ceased to move, her figure a lone shadow amidst the brilliant flames. *Sure serves you right, doesn’t it, witch?*

Inwardly celebrating, I smirked.

“Hear me, believers!” the priest who burned the witch and recited the prayer proclaimed.

“Here, we have triumphed over evil! The vile witch who practiced sorcery, summoned demons, and spread terror and chaos is no more!”

“Hooray!” the crowd exulted.

Cheers of “long live the Church!” rang through the air, as the fire flared with the crowd’s enthusiasm.

It was the year 526.
In this world, witches practiced the well-established art of sorcery…
While the emerging art of *magic* was still in its infancy. (1)

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TRANSLATOR NOTES

(1) See Terminology for the definitions of the terms “magic” and “sorcery”. They are also given in chapter two.

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Volume 1 — Chapter 1: The Witch and the Fallen Beast

Part 1

Today, I said goodbye to the dark depths.

The summer sun was blinding, so I pulled my hood firmly over my head, shading my eyes. Compared to the coolness of the limestone cave, the heat of the outdoors felt suffocating.

I wasn't used to the sunlight.

Still, the sight of clouds drifting across the blue, boundless sky and the comfortable humidity in the forest were refreshing.

This is the outside, huh? I thought. It looked just like the sketches in the books, except that nothing could replicate the vividness of these colors, nor all the movement that was going on.

Bugs were flying. Birds were chirping. Animals were cantering. Watching all of this, I walked along with bare feet. It was comfortable to walk on the moist, fallen leaves. It hurt to walk over the pebbles, twigs, and other debris.

The scents of damp dirt, crushed leaves, and rotting fruit mixed together to form a strangely calming odor which filled the air.

I glanced back at the cave.

The darkness had been cozy and comforting. I felt a little nostalgic leaving, but I'd waited for far too long.

I had finished interminable books, and resolved unresolvable debates. It felt like an eternity passed while I was there. I had thought I could spend an eternity there.

But I was just a bit tired of it all. I could wait no longer.

"I'm leaving, Thirteenth."

Having announced my decision, I felt like I had a burden lifted off my chest.

Raising my finger with the palm of my hand toward the sky, I pointed at the entrance of the cave.

The mouth of the cave made a sound and collapsed, becoming a simple pile of rubble.

An image of Thirteenth frowning came to mind. I cackled.

A little while later, while walking through the forest, I came across a small stream. It was the very same stream I had crossed a bit earlier. How curious. How could I run into the same stream when I haven't changed direction even

once?

I groaned, and jumped across the stream again. When I turned around to check, the stream I had just crossed was nowhere to be found.

“A barrier? What an unpleasantly meticulous fellow. He knew that I would break my promise from the beginning…”

I had promised to wait. I had planned to keep that promise, but it was his fault for making me wait so long. I’ve already had enough of waiting around. I’ve waited alone for too long.

What to do now? I pondered for a few seconds. Speaking quickly, I slashed my arm through the air—.

“The Book of Harvesting, verse eight: «Kudola»!”

Immediately, a thunderous roar reverberated through the air, and part of the forest was blown away.

—A number of days passed…

•••••

I (1) had often thought that forests at dusk exuded charm.

The rays of the summer sun had softened, and they would dull even further as fall approached.

The forest was plunged into darkness as soon the sun began to set below the treetops. By the time the gloomy forest was bathed in the setting sun’s crimson glow, wayfarers would have finished preparing for the night. They would then extinguish their campfires, cover themselves with their cloaks, and wait for daylight to return to the pitch-black woods.

Today at dusk, in the forest with my eyes hurting from the setting sun’s glare, I was running for my life.

The charm of a forest at dusk? My life was in jeopardy! Mowing through the bushes and branches in my way, I slid behind a large tree and paused for a moment to catch my breath. Then—

“The Book of Hunting, Verse Four — «Redæst»!”

The thick tree blew away, accompanied by the sound of an explosion. I was thrown aside and crashed into the ground.

Was that an explosive—? Is there a stockpile of odorless explosives somewhere?

I was being attacked with weapons whose natures I did not understand, so I had no other choice but to keep running.

Shit, shit, shit—!

Hearing the sound of approaching footsteps behind me, I hurriedly got up and sprinted away while an angry, strangely high-pitched voice cried out. My eardrums were busted because of the explosion, so the sounds of my surroundings were muted. My sense of balance was also out of whack, so my knees wobbled with every step I took.

But this wasn’t the time to rest.

There was no doubt that I would die if I stopped running.

I would undoubtedly be beheaded, then skinned, and my hide used for decoration. I didn’t know if I was being chased by bandits or someone looking to skin me, but I knew for sure that it wasn’t someone to sit down and have a

nice chat with.

The muddy, mushy forest floor and snaking tree roots made running difficult. Arrows of pure heat flew past, grazing my cheeks as they impaled themselves into tree trunks and disappeared.

I finally realized what my assailant was.

Oh, dammit, shit—!

“Screw you, witch! You should all go kill yourselves! I wasn’t born to be one of your damn sacrifices!!”

There had been rumors going around that the witches of this country used sorcery that no one had ever seen before.

I had been doubtful then, but if someone had shown me these arrows of light which dissipated upon impact, I would have been completely convinced.

This was the worst possible scenario—my adversary was a witch.

That I was able to figure out the identity of my assailant was good and all, but the fact that it was a witch put my life in much more danger. I ran more and more frantically.

Suddenly, my foot caught on something—a tree root.

To make matters worse, there was no ground in front of me—it was a cliff.

Please at least give me a soft landing, or let me land in a river.

Praying to God, who didn’t exist no matter how much one believed in him, I fell over dramatically and tumbled toward the ground below.

It was fortunate that the ledge from which I fell wasn’t very high up… but it was unfortunate that there was a traveler stirring a pot of stew in my landing zone, instead of a river.

—Really, how unlucky was I.

No, the unlucky one was the traveler I was going to flatten. Robed from head to toe, the traveler looked very slender and frail. I was a giant compared to this person.

Sorry, please forgive me. If you get crushed to death, I’ll dig a grave for you. If I have the spare time, that is.

The next moment, I struck the ground and went head over heels as an intense pain erupted from my abdomen.

“Ah, A……Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

From nearby came a shriek of despair.

It seemed that the traveler had somehow managed to avoid my sudden plunge from the cliff, but had sacrificed her soup to do so. *I’m so sorry.*

Groaning, I was getting up when the trembling traveler jumped in front of me and began shaking me back and forth.

“You bastard!! How dare you waste the soup I stewed myself?! Do you even know how much time it took for me to make that soup?! It’s utterly incomparable to simply roasting a wild animal! H-How-How dare yo—!”

“W-W-Wait, wait, calm down! I’m really sorry, but this ain’t the time to be angry!”

“This…isn’t the time? What could be a bigger problem than my soup—“

“Watch out, idiot!”

Yelling, I immediately shielded the traveler with my body, flattening us both against the ground. It was just in time, as bolts of heat once again flew past overhead.

“…I see, so there does appear to be a bigger problem.”

“Good thing you got it so quickly; lets go!”

I slung the wayfarer over my shoulder and ran. I wondered why I was bringing this person along.

“Hey, why are you taking me with you?”

It seemed like the burden on my shoulder was thinking the same thing. *We’d get along, wouldn’t we, traveler?* I thought for a moment.

“Just happened!”

I answered honestly. But, in hindsight, leaving this burden behind as a distraction would probably have been the smarter choice.

Is it too late to change my mind?

“You… you are being pursued, are you not?”

Without hearing my treacherous thoughts, the weight on my shoulder had finally figured out what was going on. Anyone else would have caught on immediately.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but there’s someone tryna kill me!”

“…What did you do?”

“I didn’t do nothin’! They just wanna sacrifice me—a male fallen beast!” I couldn’t stand its disapproving tone, so I literally roared.

Fallen beasts were half man, half beast; so-called monsters. Nobody knew why, but monsters with the bodies of animals, just like me, were sometimes born to perfectly normal parents.

Witches desired the heads of the fallen to use them as tools for practicing sorcery. As a result, I was prized by those who wanted to try and sell my head to the witches. Namely, every single crook and shady person there was.

The first attack came when I turned thirteen—in other words, it was my fault that bandits ransacked my village. I was but a weak child then, so I wasn’t able to protect my village from the armed bandits.

I was able to live on, at the cost of three human lives.

So I, like many other fallen, left home and became a mercenary. To escape the ruffians, I had to become one of them. Since then, I’ve fought in the battlefield on the side of desperate country after desperate country.

Mercenaries were warmongers. They were hired by one side of a conflict, and fought to the death with mercenaries hired by the other. Whether it was a war between empires, a skirmish between fiefdoms, or a border dispute between minor clans—it was depressing, but even to the point of being participants in a bloody brawl; mercenaries didn’t lack job opportunities.

Among the mercenaries, the fallen were the best fighters, so they were welcomed in every conflict. Thanks to this, one way or another, they didn't fit into the rigidly structured mercenary groups, and were able to remain independent.

Rather, it should be said that fallen beasts weren't allowed to live any other way.

It didn't matter what country, what city, what village; fallen beasts weren't welcome. Even the church treated us as vile creatures, so to a normal human, there was no way that we were seen as anything but frightening.

Furthermore, because of the witches' craving for the heads of fallen, highwaymen had been taking the initiative, luring fallen beasts into ambushes. Still, this was the first time I had been attacked directly by a witch. *Looks like I've been pretty lucky so far.*

I had only thought of witches as nothing but malicious puppeteers before, but from today onward, I'll regard them as real threats.

But for now, I needed to focus on escaping.

Screech— a squeal rent through the air; I immediately ducked behind a tree. The bolt of light impaled its trunk, making it crack and topple over.

"Shit—how the hell does she do that?! Since when could witches use sorcery as semiautomatic crossbows?!"

I had heard that witches were able to do the impossible with sorcery, but this was beyond my imagination. Cursing, I started running again.

I wasn't particularly knowledgeable about witches and sorcery, but everyone knew that witches needed to complete major rituals as part of practicing sorcery. After completing a ritual that took months to complete, a witch would be able to gain powers which could be used to easily destroy a country. There were plenty of heroic tales about the Knights of the Church defeating such witches before they could complete the required ceremonies.

Practicing sorcery required large amounts of time, so witches sequestered themselves in their lairs, relying on their numerous minions for protection while they focused on completing the necessary rituals. —At least, that's how I had thought it worked.

Nothing I knew of could explain how this witch possessed the ability to run while rapidly shooting bolts of light and, without gunpowder, blow up a large tree.

I was extremely confused. At any rate, I wasn't going to live long enough to find out how unless I kept running.

"Is that 'Staim'…?"

Unexpectedly, the weight on my shoulder said something.

Ignoring it, I continued to run until it began banging on my head.

"Hey, is there really a need to keep running?"

"Of course, dammit! I'll die if I don't!"

"That's not true. —Alright, let me down."

There and then, devoid of sympathy, I threw the burden off to the side. It told me to put it down, so I no longer felt any obligation to take it with me. *Farewell, wayfarer. I'll keep on living.*

I had run only a few steps when I went headlong into the ground once again, this time because of an earthquake.

“Shit…that really hurt!”

Moaning, I somehow managed to look up. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Shrieking and staggering, the pursuing witch fell to the ground as, swallowing up trees, the earth around her rose up and formed earthen walls which boxed her in. They soon extended out of sight.

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TRANSLATOR NOTES

(1) Just in case, here’s a note indicating that the narrator of the first section is no longer narrating this section.

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Volume 1 — Chapter 1: The Witch and the Fallen Beast

Part 2

“How… what the heck is goin’ on?!”

I glanced at the traveler, not expecting to see anything out of the ordinary, but froze in shock.

The traveler’s hood had come off, revealing shimmering silver hair which billowed as if caught in a gale.

—A woman.

An exceedingly beautiful woman at that.

Although my life was in danger, I couldn’t help but recall how light and slender she had been in my arms. She had spoken in a confident, calm manner, but her voice had been too high-pitched to be a man’s. My male instincts were telling me that I should have felt her up more, among other things inappropriate in the current situation. What a waste.

But could it be?

This woman—was she doing this?

Besides her, the witch and I were the only ones here.

It was obvious that the witch was the target of the cataclysm, and just as obvious that I couldn’t pull off such tricks. There wasn’t any other way of looking at these facts.

In the blink of an eye, it was over.

The walls had formed a giant earthen box, which looked as natural as if it had always been there, yet stuck out like a sore thumb because of its intimidating presence.

“This is the Book of Capturing, verse three: «Etrak». It would take a week to escape with something as weak as «Staim».«Edarest» would allow her to get out easily—but she looked quite tired. She would need to rest for a while first. Now—I would like to hear an explanation for all of this.”

Her red lips curled into a cold smirk. I could now see that she had long eyelashes, barely obscuring unnaturally clear, blueish-purple irises which shone like gemstones.

I stayed where I was, mouth agape, staring at her like an idiot.

“You… you’re… a witch…?”

The woman turned to face me. As I expected, she possessed fear-inducing beauty. But, from the confident look that replaced her smirk, I could detect immaturity and innocence.

It was as if she had become a different person.

“Certainly—I am a witch. The witch of earth and darkness who extracts meaning from meaninglessness, and conjures forth something from nothing!”

Oh. Alright. I see. Got it.

Without further ado, I stood up… and ran out of there as fast as I could.

•••••

If there were one good thing about being born a fallen beast, it would be that my physical abilities far surpassed those of normal humans.

If I were to run at full speed, no one would be able to catch up. If I were to get into a fist fight with a normal human, he would die and I would walk away unharmed. This was the perfect body for fighting.

It seemed that I’d managed to lose the witch.

I raced through the forest, following a trail of bare dirt cutting through the grass. Breathing heavily, I hid behind a tree and warily scanned the woods in the direction from which I came. The forest was enveloped by darkness at this point, but I couldn’t sense anyone in pursuit. However, I couldn’t let my guard down just yet. After confirming that I was indeed completely safe, I breathed a sigh of relief and slid down into a sitting position with my back against the tree.

Seriously—what a disaster that was. I looked around for danger one last time, and began setting up camp in the dim moonlight.

Even if a witch possessed unrivaled beauty, she would still be my worst enemy. Even if I were so enthralled by a witch’s beauty that I wanted to *let* her kill me, my instinct for self-preservation would still be stronger than my sexual desires. In any case, no one would grieve over the death of a fallen beast. I was the only person who would mourn my death.

The fallen were disliked throughout the world. Of course, the primary reason was that our appearances were strange, but because the majority of fallen beasts became mercenaries and bandits, we were essentially murderers. If I were a human parent, I would do everything I could to prevent my child from approaching fallen beasts. “Don’t come into our villages, our shops, our sight—.”

Ultimately speaking, there wasn’t a single ally of the fallen beasts on the planet.

I was lucky to be a mercenary because I never had to worry about having enough to eat, but having to take the lives of others, whether I wanted to or not, bothered me.

All I wanted to do was to open a small bar somewhere, settle down with a lovable woman, and live a leisurely life until I died, but… unfortunately, the world wasn’t going to allow me such pleasures.

“If only I could get what I wanted…”

Sighing, I looked contemptuously at my fur-covered hand.

Most fallen beasts had bodies of large, carnivorous animals. Many possessed the bodies of bears and wolves, but I didn’t know what animal I was. It was probably some feline, even though it would be too cruel for me to be a cat. My

fur was white with light black stripes, although the white mostly won out over the black, creating a complex pattern. I was fairly certain that this was just an idiosyncrasy, but it made me stand out at night, so I used my black cloak to cover myself.

“Well, at least it looks better than havin’ no pattern at all.”

In an effort to cheer myself up, I forced a smile.

I was turning introspective, but in my youth, I had brooded over this to the extent of cutting myself and watching my blood well up. I had pondered until, eventually, it had hurt too much and I had been forced to give up. This had taken place right after I left my village. I had been living on a deserted mountain while covered in blood, eating birds and mice to sustain myself. I may have been able to reflect on my own nature because of that experience.

Anyhow, I was a monster, and no one would pity me if I perished. I would at least be motivated to live on if someone pitied me even the tiniest bit.

More than ten years have passed since then, and the wounds of that period have completely disappeared. Even the devastating loneliness I had felt has faded due to all the hardships I have endured since—no, the loneliness has only dulled.

At any rate, living alone was fun. Besides, there might be a woman in the world with strange enough tastes to reciprocate my love. I could only hope. I didn’t believe those stories about even harlots refusing to provide company to fallen beasts, but—

“If only I were a cuter animal…”

For instance, although I didn’t know if there were fallen beasts with bodies of cute wildlife like rabbits, they would certainly receive better treatment than fallen like me, who had the bodies of carnivorous beasts.

I stirred my soup and worried about things I couldn’t do anything about.

I accidentally left behind the rabbit I had killed before the witch started chasing me, so I had to make a soup out of herbs I found nearby and some dried meat I saved for emergencies. I sprinkled some salt into the pot, and put in a chunk of animal fat that I had kept, wrapped in leather, in my bag. After tasting the soup, I added another pinch of salt. *Hmm, I guess this is as good as it’ll get.* It just had to simmer a little while longer to let the flavors mingle properly. I rummaged through my bag and took out a compass and a map, which I unfolded on my lap.

—Map of the Vanias Kingdom, Revised Edition—

Many merchants go to the city of Foamicaum to sell their goods. There, one can find luxuries from around the world.

In the imperial capital of Prasta, there are performances in the city square every week on the day of the goddess.

Specialty: Roasted Ebru boar (A giant boar native to Vanias). Its flesh is tender and succulent.

Warning! Wild Ebru boars live in the woods. Hunting them is forbidden. Always stay on the road.

Reading the last line, I frowned.

“I’m not in the woods ’cause I wanna be, so gimme a break, eh?”

Speaking to no one in particular, I attempted to determine my current position from the positions of the stars and the point on the map where I was attacked.

The Vanias Kingdom was located roughly at the center of the continent. It was formerly an isolated state surrounded

by a mountain range, but by tunneling through the mountains, they were able to secure trade with neighboring countries, and successfully attracted numerous travelers and merchants.

The mountains were so difficult to cross that no matter how high the toll for entering Vanias was, travelers would pay up to use the tunnels. These underpasses were so unimaginably massive, that there were rest stops built into the eaves. Placed here and there in every tunnel were colored lamps which illuminated the ceilings and the rest stops, making the passages look like dreamscapes. If I were a child, there would be no doubt that I'd have been extremely excited. But nowadays, there was a rumor going around that the Vanias Kingdom was dealing with some problems.

With the kingdom going through tough times, thievery was running rampant. Starting with the merchants, travelers began to avoid this country, because getting caught in combat would mean endangering their lives.

As a result, Vanias, which was built on revenue from wayfarers, was heading toward collapse. Of course, the kingdom's higher-ups dedicated themselves to solving the problem. The first thing they did was strengthen their country militarily—by hiring mercenaries. This information spread both inside and outside the kingdom, and reached the ears of mercenaries like me.

Such being the case, I was heading toward Prasta, the imperial capital of Vanias, to seek employment. According to the border patrol, the main force was to consist of fallen beasts, so I was ordered to take my letter of introduction and go to the capital, though this was fairly bothersome.

There were a great number of endemic species in Vanias, so to avoid their habitats, I had to take a winding path through the countryside. Owing to that, I couldn't part with my map. I traced my finger over the parchment, which was worn out from countless rewrites. From the path where I initially set up camp, through the woods to the path I was on now, that would mean Prasta was—.

"Thataway, eh?"

Looking up after confirming my course of travel, I froze. A hooded figure, illuminated by the flickering flame, was using a wooden ladle to drink my soup.

•••••

"AAH!"

As one would have expected, I screamed. Normally, I was extremely aware of my surroundings, even for a fallen beast. Nothing had ever successfully snuck up on me before. But even with my superior senses, I had been completely oblivious to this person's approach. On top of that, it was the same exceedingly beautiful woman from earlier—in other words, the witch. To make matters even worse, she was eating my dinner. I wasn't sure which of these things upset me the most.

"Hey! Stop helpin' yerself to mah soup!"

It became clear, from what I blurted out, that I was most concerned about my soup.

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Volume 1 — Chapter 1: The Witch and the Fallen Beast

Part 3

As I snatched the pot away from her, the witch made a distressed sound.

“G-Give that back! That’s my dinner!”

“No! This is my dinner! Mine!”

“You knocked over my pot of soup earlier, didn’t you?! Giving me your soup in return is the noble thing to do!”

“There’s nothin’ noble in helpin’ out a witch!”

“Fine then! If you are not going to hand over that soup, then I will have no choice—but to use sorcery!”

I had no response to that threat. *That’s right, my opponent is a witch after all. I shouldn’t be trying to protect my soup, I should be retreating with my sword raised!*

“Listen carefully. If you do not give me that soup right now, I will cause a famine in the north, a plague in the south, a rat infestation in the west, and the death of all wheat crops in the east. The world will be destroyed unless you hand that pot to me this instant!”

What a witch.

But, for some reason, I wasn’t afraid.

I was used to malice, animosity, and bloodlust, and noticed immediately if those feelings were directed toward me. So if I didn’t consciously recognize the danger, I would still unconsciously reach for my blade. Since I wasn’t frightened in the least, I surmised that this witch was all bark and no bite.

I laid aside my worries.

“Do whatever ya want.”

I chose to keep my evening meal over sparing the world. As long as nothing happened to me, I couldn’t care less about the world. Just like how if I were to die, nobody would think twice about it. I snatched the ladle out of the flabbergasted witch’s hand, and began to greedily gulp down my soup.

“Waah! Waah! D-Do you even know what you are saying? Even a demon would take this more seriously! Hey! Don’t drink all of it!”

“Stop buggin’ me. You’re gettin’ really annoying!”

After I shook the witch off my back, she slumped onto the ground. An unnatural silence descended, and I stopped slurping my soup to look at her.

It was strange, how she lay on the ground without moving even a hair.

What if she's dead? It would be great if she really were dead, but even so, I felt bad for her.

"…Hello?" I timidly called out.

"—I"

A muffled voice responded. So she was still alive. Not only was she alive, but an ominous and unearthly aura emanated from her body.

Did I mess up?

I couldn't sense any danger, but I was dealing with a witch. I didn't know what she'd do if I angered her. I shivered and readied myself—

"I want some too…"

I felt the adrenaline drain out of me.

It was more of a pleading voice than one of anger.

What was this? Why did she sound like she was being mistreated? In combination with her raggedy robes, she looked pitiful. Was *I* the bad guy here?

"I am so hungry… I worked all day to make that soup… I… I was looking forward so much to tasting it… I even woke up at sunrise to start preparing…"

The witch whined and pawed at the ground.

I felt guilty when she said that; I truly was sorry for ruining her hard work.

I was being hunted by a witch at the time, but that still didn't excuse how I had ruined her dinner. She had even saved me nonetheless. If I didn't give her a bowl of soup in return, then I would be no better than a mere animal.

"That soup you made was so tasty… I want to have some too…"

It was tasty, you say? I couldn't deny her any further. I was actually quite proud of having made the soup so quickly.

Clicking my tongue, I filled a bowl with soup and held it toward to the witch. I had lost.

Although her face was obscured by a hood, her expression changed to one of joy as she understood, and she quickly snatched the bowl out of my hands, rapidly slurping the soup straight from the bowl.

“If only you had done this from the beginning instead of putting on airs.”

And she was back to this attitude. This was why I disliked the beings termed “beautiful women”. Beautiful witches were even worse.

The witch finished the soup in record time, and even picked out the scraps of dried meat at the bottom of the bowl. She held out the bowl to me with an attitude that made it clear she didn’t expect to be refused, not even a little.

“More.”

How immodest. I furrowed my brow; of course I wasn’t going to give her seconds.

“What the heck are ya here for? What d’ya want from me?”

“I really would like to tell you, but I just don’t have the strength to do so on an empty stomach.”

How could she be so shameless? Yet I knew that even if I glared at her, she wouldn’t be intimidated in the slightest.

I didn’t want to provoke her because I treasured my life. Since the witch didn’t seem to have any intent of attacking and for some reason didn’t carry out her threats, she would have to listen to me. The only issue was that she might take offense to my requests.

“If you answer me, I’ll give you another bowl.”

The witch looked back and forth between the empty bowl and me, then suddenly thrust the bowl toward me, as if to say, *I’ll talk, so hand over the soup.* She then began talking in a dispassionate tone.

“I’m on a journey to find a man named ‘Thirteenth’.”

Thirteenth isn’t a name; it’s a number.

I wanted to interrupt, but I held myself back. After all, the other party was a witch. I couldn’t use common sense when dealing with her.

“Thirteenth was my companion. We studied sorcery together in the forest of the bowed moon, and he had to leave to take care of a problem. I haven’t received any news from him ever since, so I had no choice but to follow his trail of magic and ended up here.”

“The Forest of the Bowed Moon” was located at the very edge of the continent, and was often called “The Forest without a King”. No country wanted to annex the region because it had a deep connection to witches, so it became an area of nothing. Supposedly, the church had organized witch hunts in that area a countless number of times, but… in a place where witches freely roamed the land, the hunting squads had proved incompetent.

“There are witch hunts in this country, right?”

“There’re witch hunts everywhere.”

The witch's expression darkened, and she began to rant.

"The hunts are far more aggressive here. Three times I was almost burned at the stake just for walking."

I nodded. It was the problem currently faced by the Vanias kingdom. The problem that it was trying to solve by gathering fallen beast mercenaries—the problem of witches.

"There's a witches' rebellion goin' on right now, so 'course the witch hunts here would be more intense than other places'."

"A witches' rebellion?"

Asking for an explanation, the witch blinked.

"Isn't it the wrong era for that?"

Shouldn't you support them because you're a witch too? It seemed to me that this witch was different from the others.

Well, it certainly was the wrong era to be revolting. Large-scale witch rebellions were unheard of outside of folk tales.

"I thought so too, so I didn't believe the news when I heard it…'till that witch chased me through the woods. It was easy to figure out what was goin' on after that, 'cause witches didn't usually attack travelers."

The way other countries hunted down witches made it seem like they were hunting for survivors.

It was said that, five hundred years ago, there had been a great conflict between the witches and the church. The witches had lost and were forced into hiding. Now they were viewed as evil, and the world sought to eradicate them.

But—it had been five hundred years. They were probably fed up.

Of course, it was right for the church and government to hunt witches who were causing calamities left and right, but it wasn't right for them to hunt witches who were content to live their lives peacefully. As far as the church was concerned, witch hunts were, from their conception, simply a way to demonstrate its might and authority. If evil didn't exist, neither would the concept of righteousness. If the concept of righteousness didn't exist, then no one would believe in God. For this reason, the church decided to make witches symbols of evil.

If a state requested aid from them, the Knights of the Church would mobilize… for an exorbitant "donation".

Since Vanias didn't seek the Knights' aid this time, the Church was simply watching from the sidelines. This situation suited the witches of Vanias, who rioted as they pleased while the kingdom desperately tried to suppress them.

"Actually, ever since I got to Vanias, I've been hearin' lots of rumors 'bout witches runnin' rampant. Apparently it ain't rare to see witches takin' over villages and enslavin' all the villagers either, but I guess it's possible that witches like those are just takin' advantage of the revolution. You pretend like you don't know what's goin' on, but you're actually here to help the witches, aren't you?"

The witch trembled and turned pale.

"I don't want to do something that bothersome! If the rebellion succeeds then the country would need a ruler, right? I don't want that responsibility. The only country I would consider ruling would be dark, cramped, and full of spiders."

That kind of country doesn't exist. I imagined her being swarmed by spiders, and immediately regretted it. My dinner didn't look so appeti—. Huh? The pot was gone.

I realized that I was no longer holding onto the pot, and immediately turned to look at the witch. Somehow, she had managed to steal it away, and was hurriedly drinking the soup.

“You…when—how’d you do that?!”

“I’m a witch, mercenary. With your guard down just now, I could have easily robbed you of all your fur. Luck won’t save you if you don’t pay attention, just like how this soup is now mine.”

“W-Why you amateur, don’t lecture me!”

I uttered a low growl, but the pot was already in her hands, and I had no way of getting it back. Left with no other choice, I licked what was left of the soup off of the bowl I was still holding.

“So? What’s your business here?”

“I’m looking for a book some villains stole from me. That’s what Thirteenth left to find.”

“A book?”

“It’s the only book of its kind. If it were used for evil, some small problems would arise.”

“Like what?”

The witch stopped speaking and stopped eating. She spoke in a soft voice.

Just one remark.

“The end of the world.”

“…What about the world?”

“I said, the end of the world.”

I stifled a yawn.

“That’s amazin’. I’m *so* scared. I feel like I’m gonna cry ’cause I’m so scared right now.”

“Even If you don’t believe me, can you still try to be civil? I feel a bit hurt.”

“I’m not stupid enough to believe that a single book could end the whole world.”

“A single book…? Don’t kid yourself. A single *page* from that book would be more than enough.”

Her voice was as dispassionate as a demon’s, not exaggeratedly fearful; it was as if she were merely stating fact. Thus, her tone exuded a certain degree of realism, so I couldn’t help but suspend my disbelief.

Pragmatically speaking, the world was fine despite the book’s theft. I didn’t know exactly when it had been stolen, but from the way the witch spoke, I could tell that this “Thirteenth” person had been away for a long time.

If this book really could be used to bring about doomsday, then it should have happened by now.

“Well, even if everythin’ you’ve told me so far is true, still, what do I got to do with any of it? I asked you what you wanted from me, but you still haven’t given me a straight answer.”

“What, you really don’t get it yet?”

“Sorry, but I ain’t that smart.”

“Then to sum things up: I have to get a book back from some thieves, and it’s currently located in this country somewhere. But I can’t just walk around alone in these parts; I am a witch after all. Besides, fleeing gets rather tiring after a while.”

“So, ” the witch looked at me. At last, I realized what she was getting at.

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Volume 1 — Chapter 1: The Witch and the Fallen Beast

Part 4

“Be my escort!”

“Never!” I yelled back.

“You may want to calm down before making a decision.”

“I don’t needa think hard about it. I *hate* witches.”

“Wait, hear me out. We witches offer up sacrifices to demons in order to realize our desires. In fact, forming contracts with demons and paying them sacrifices commensurate in scope with one’s wishes are key concepts in the study of sorcery.”

“I don’t care ’bout your stupid law of equivalent exchange. I’m in this country only to be a witch exterminator, ’cause a world without witches is a world that’s gonna be safer for me. So as you can see, protectin’ you wouldn’t be like me at all.”

“A man who speaks his mind, huh… but why do you despise us so?”

“Can’t you tell from lookin’ at my face?”

“Your face?”

The witch, gazing at my visage, cocked her head.

“It *is* pretty handsome; I can’t say that I dislike it.”

“’S that sarcasm?”

“Not really. You have a magnificent coat, keen eyes, and a robust jaw—all the hallmarks of an apex predator. Furthermore, the human visage hidden beneath your bestial exterior is pleasant-looking as well.”

A human face—beneath my fur? I ran my hands over my face, but it was still that of a beast.

“You can see a human’s face here?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t be able to call myself a witch if I couldn’t. By the way, you’re incorrect in calling yourself a “fallen beast”. Your appearance is actually the result of the returning spell ‘Beastgranting”.

“Re…returning spell?”

"'Beastgranting' was the witches' attempt to give humans the strength of animals. It ended up changing the humans' bodies into those of beasts. I hear that thousands of years ago, when states did nothing but fight amongst each other, such humans were mass-produced by the millions."

"You tryin' to tell me that witches made us fallen beasts?!"

"That's not entirely correct. Although returning spells are similar to normal spells, the two are actually quite different. Spells are actively cast, while returning spells are the end results of specific chains of events."

"You're not makin' any sense."

I frowned. As if she were dealing with a struggling student, the witch began to speak animatedly.

"I will demonstrate. First, hand me that pebble."

She pointed to a benign-looking piece of rock next to me. After I handed it to her, she began playing with it in her palm.

"Let this stone represent sorcery. Being a witch, I use it."

She threw the pebble with force I had not imagined to be possible from such thin arms. It ricocheted off a tree, somehow went around her, and hit me square in the head.

A solid *crunch* that would not be out of place in a boxing match resounded around the clearing. Thankfully, I was a fallen beast, so I avoided having my head cracked open.

"…Ow."

The witch turned toward me and shrugged, as if to say "it was an accident".

"The rock hit the tree, bounced back, missed me, and continued along its path until it hit you. The same principle applies to sorcery."

"How it bounced off the tree and hit me?"

"Exactly. When the aforementioned beast warriors die, their spirits return to the witch that made them. But, if the witch is dead, then these spirits instead "return" to the witch's closest relative. The process could be compared to fertilization. So these spirits inhabit women's wombs, and are reborn as what you would call "fallen beasts".

"In other words, you're sayin' that I had a relative who was a witch, and I was born a fallen beast 'cause she died? No way!"

"Even if it's not common knowledge, the truth is still the truth. I'm a witch. I don't kid around about things concerning sorcery."

Contradicting her claim was the Church's proclamation that "being born a fallen beast is an indication of evil deeds in past lives." Accordingly, public knowledge stated that fallen beasts were warlike, had violent tendencies, and spent all their time fighting.

As for me, who would do anything for a peaceful life, I wanted to tell the Church to "stop joking around and get lost," but most people believed its message. It was extremely disheartening.

"But… havin' a witch in my family tree…"

"Witches are generally estranged from their families, and live for an extremely long time. When a family forgets that

there was once a witch in their family tree, the spell returns."

The witch let out a sigh, staring melancholically into the now-empty pot.

"—Do you want to be human again?" the witch asked.

"—*Can* I be human again?" I countered.

The witch smiled.

"I *can* turn you back. Quite easily, in fact. But will you accompany me in return? Make your choice, mercenary."

My dream was to open a bar somewhere out in the countryside, meet a nice girl, and live a tranquil life.

If this witch was true to her word, then I could claim the normal life I'd long ago given up on. I wouldn't have to hide my face, live in fear of witches, or scare away harlots anymore. The only question was whether or not I could trust her. She *was* a witch, after all.

"What use could someone as dumb as I am be to a witch?"

"Perhaps I simply want you because you're fascinating. I'm not a particularly picky witch. I want you more than anyone else, even if you're not the smartest. Being my escort would require sufficient physical strength."

"You're not sayin' this just to make me let my guard down, are ya?"

"Oh, come on. If I really wanted to kill you, I would have done so a long time ago and without pointless conversation."

I wasn't so sure about that. In all my years of dealing with witches, I haven't seen a single one be so trustworthy. I wouldn't say that this witch was deserving of trust, but she wasn't to be immediately discredited either.

I wanted to be able to trust her, but if she was lying…

She *was* a witch, after all.

"…Shall we form a pact?" the witch abruptly suggested.

"A pact?" I asked, confused.

"The witches' pact, a contract of blood. You agree to be my bodyguard, and I agree to make you a human; then the document is drafted using a mix of our blood. Anyone that breaks the agreement would be unconditionally annihilated."

"A… annihilated… you…"

I faltered. In contrast, the witch smiled leisurely.

"There's no need to be afraid. You'll be fine as long as you abide by the terms of the agreement. Here, hold out your hand."

She quickly grabbed my hand, giving me no time to object.

Her hand was soft. My heart skipped a beat.

She drew my index finger toward her lips and, without hesitating, put the tip in her mouth. I shuddered as she ran her tongue over my bare skin. It felt as if every hair on my body was standing on end.

“W-Woah!”

A moment later, I winced as the skin on my fingertip was torn open. The witch nodded with satisfaction as she saw the steady trickle of blood running from my finger, and did the same to her own.

“With this mixture of our blood, I will write a contract in mirror writing. If it is burned, the contract will be void. If either of us dies, the contract will be void. Otherwise, as long as we clearly recognize abandonment as unacceptable, you and I will be bound by this pact. Unfortunately, I don’t have any paper on me, so I guess cloth will have to suffice.”

The witch tore a piece of cloth off the hem of her robe, which made her appear to be even more ragged than she already was. I watched the crimson blood drip from our fingers, strangely calm.

“Hey… why’re you choosin’ me? If you want to attract less suspicion, why don’tcha choose a less noticeable person to travel with? Bein’ near me’ll only draw more attention to you.”

“Since I wish to go unnoticed, it only makes sense to pick someone that will draw all the suspicion toward himself and away from me.”

The witch answered nonchalantly. *I see.* Whether or not that was true remained to be seen, although between a fallen beast and a witch, the former would definitely attract more attention.

“Also, you smell like the cave I used to live in.”

“The cave you used to live in?”

“That’s right. It was a limestone cave in the forest of the bowed moon, and was quite comfortable despite being dark and damp. We called it our ‘hole in the ground’. That’s a phrase we witches use to refer to our lairs.”

I lightly sniffed my arm, wrinkling my nose. I’d been running through the forest for a long time so I positively reeked of turf, but even so, I smelled strongly of animals.

“…Did ya keep livestock?”

“Livestock…? Oh yes, we had quite a few snakes and spiders.”

What did *spiders* have to do with livestock and snakes? I wanted to find the nearest inn and take a hot bath to rid myself of the thought.

Just then, I started chuckling.

Here I was, in front of a witch, about to form a blood pact and possibly facing annihilation—and I was thinking about taking a bath. It appeared that I had already subconsciously recognized that the witch meant me no harm. I had been foolish to rely on logic alone to judge her. After all, my intuition was the reason that I was still alive today.

I stroked my snout and picked up the rag she was holding.

“Wait! The contract isn’t—“

Before the witch could say “—done yet”, I tore the piece of cloth to shreds and scattered them to the wind.

The witch yelled in protest.

“Aah!! What’re you doing?! Do you think writing on a rag using blood as ink is easy?!”

“A contract implies that we don’t trust each other. We don’t need somethin’ like that. Here, gimme your hand for a sec.”

This time, I was the one grabbing *her* hand. It was small and delicate, and blood was dripping from her finger.

I pressed our cut fingertips together, mixing our blood.

The witch looked at me with recognition in her eyes.

“I think I recognize this. Is it a blood oath?” she asked excitedly, pale cheeks flushed. “It’s done like this, right?” laughing, she intertwined our fingers, and firmly pressed her extended thumb against mine.

“It’s better than those formal contracts you witches use. This is more natural for humans—for mercenaries.”

I extricated my hand from her strong grip, the blood on my finger still surprisingly warm. I wondered if mixing fallen beast and witch blood would produce something unexpected. But seeing the witch standing there, thumb covered in blood, I no longer cared.

“I promise, mercenary, that I will not take your head.”

“Oh. ‘kay, thanks. So… what’s your name?”

“My name is Zero.”

Zero is a number, not a name. I considered telling her, but decided not to.

After that, the conversation lapsed into silence. I glanced at her searchingly.

“Aren’t you… gonna ask me my name?”

The witch shrugged drowsily.

“I’m not interested.”

“Huh?”

“The only people I refer to by name are my underlings—my servants. Keep your name private in the company of witches. If you gave me your name, I could immediately turn you into an unquestioning lackey.”

The witch smirked from under her hood. She held out both hands as if to say “in your face”. She looked both childish and grandmotherly at the same time.

“Ultimately, you’re still a witch, eh?”

“Yes. I’m the ultimate witch.”

I chuckled, and the witch laughed in agreement: “It does sound pretty terrifying, does it?”

And so, our extraordinary relationship began. Neither of us had referred to the other by name, so it was as if we were strangers. However, I guess that was normal for a night-old fellowship.

It was a good distance to maintain in case our partnership ended prematurely.

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Volume 1 — Chapter 2: "The Book of Zero"

Part 1

Soft. Warm. Fragrant.

I was hugging something, whatever it was. Regardless, it was an unusually pleasant morning.

I opened my eyes lethargically and saw the burnt-out campfire, along with the blackened ground beneath it. I tried to recall what had happened last night, but couldn't remember a thing. *Something about a witch?*

"Zzz…" A noise came from within my embrace. *Oh, the witch.* I thought sleepily.

"Mas…ter…"

"Eh…wha?!"

I was instantly wide awake. Something went "gueh" like a squashed frog as I leapt to my feet. Looking over, I saw the witch, Zero, clad in robes which were nothing more than rags. She had been sent flying by my sudden movement, and was now lying on the ground, still as a corpse. No longer obscured by her hood, which had fallen to the side, her unbearably beautiful face was illuminated by the sunlight.

It seemed that for humans, once one attained a certain degree of beauty, the concepts of age and gender no longer applied. As for Zero, who appeared sexless, she possessed both the innocence of a young girl and the allure of a prostitute. Either way, it unsettled me.

"Wha…what're ya doin'?!"

Zero opened her bleary eyes slightly and began moving about restlessly as if she were looking for something, all with a displeased look on her face.

"Fur…"

"—Eh?"

"So cold…my fur…head…so soft and fluffy…"

"Wake up!" I yelled, striking her on the head.

"Gah!" Zero jumped, startled.

"O… ow! Why did you have to hit me?! I was only sleeping!"

"You've got a problem with everythin', huh? What were you doin' while you were sleepin'?!"

“What…was I doing?”

Zero groggily repeated my question back to me as she gingerly rubbed her head.

“Um…if I’m not mistaken, I was sleeping in your mantle, buried in fur.”

“Why’re you answerin’ me so calmly…? I’m scoldin’ you! Say sorry once you’ve caught on!”

“Don’t start the day off yelling with such an infuriated look on your face; you’re going to scare the animals. What are you so mad about, anyway?”

Yawn, she opened her mouth wide and yawned. Zero narrowed her eyes as if the sunlight was too bright, and cheerfully pulled her hood back on. It hid the upper half of her face from view, and was unfashionable—not to mention suspicious-looking—but I finally felt at ease after she did so. Extreme attractiveness was poisonous to my eyes.

“Were you bothered by my intrusion into your personal space? There’s no helping it, since you have lots of fur, and as you saw, my skin doesn’t protect me very well from the cold. Unless you want me to freeze while you get to sleep snugly all by yourself?”

“But, y’know, I didn’t choose to have a fur coat…”

“It’s not a question of whether you chose to or not. It’s about how you aren’t shivering in the cold. Besides, you didn’t find the experience displeasing, right?”

Her mouth was etched into a thin smile. I thought back to how soft and warm and fragrant she had felt when I had woken up, and my retort caught in my throat. As if she’d read my mind, she nodded with satisfaction.

“It’s cold and lonely to sleep by myself, so since there are two of us here, it only makes sense to sleep together. And above all, you were able to sleep with someone as exquisite as I am. I would say that you should be thankful and not angry.”

“You really just called yourself ‘squisite…”

“The fact still is that you’re resistant to the cold.” She repeated her words from earlier with a triumphant expression.

“Do witches lack modesty or shyness or somethin’…?” I tutted.

“Someone with those qualities couldn’t possibly do a witch’s duties. What, have you fallen for me?” she said in a strange, almost gleeful voice.

“No!” I cut her off immediately.

Probably. No, definitely.

“Ugh, how boring.” The witch really did sound bored.

“So…well, it doesn’t really matter, does it? It’s fine if you likewise think of me as just some inanimate object. You will be my bed, and I will be your hug pillow. That way, we both benefit. I’m glad we’ve reached an agreement.”

“Don’t assume that I agree to this! I—“

“You are my mercenary—right? A mercenary must obey his employer.”

She was right, but the thought of cuddling with a beauty every night made me more tense than overjoyed.

As if to break the silence, Zero's stomach rumbled.

"…I'm hungry, mercenary."

I released the tension in my shoulders as I saw how she was gazing at me.

Arguing seemed foolish when my opponent was in a state like this. I did have some birds I caught last night…

" 'S roast bird with salt okay with ya?"

Zero just grinned nonchalantly and pestered me to hurry up.

•••••

"I wanted to hunt witches, but somehow wound up escorting one instead…" something like that would probably get laughs at the bar. But of course, there was no way I would go around advertising myself as a witch's escort. I'd get burnt at the stake right along with Zero.

Preparing to roast the birds, I discussed our plans for today with her. I needed to know where her destination was, as she hadn't told me yet.

Zero didn't know any of the place names in Vanias, so I took out my map and had her indicate where she was going.

"Where are we right now?"

Holding the map open, Zero tilted her head to the side. I pointed to a spot on the map. She nodded and said "hm…", sliding her finger across the map.

Two finger lengths from the spot I was pointing to—there it was. Prasta, the imperial capital.

"Thirteenth is around here. At least, that's how I feel," Zero answered blankly. I was perplexed; Prasta was where I was heading. That is to say, it was witch hunt headquarters. The fact that the capital was recruiting fallen beasts because skirmishes with witches went all the way to the kingdom's heartland meant that there was no way I could lead a witch there without consequences.

"Prasta's fightin' some witches right now, so there ain't no way that a mage's gonna be there. Ya probably just made a mis—"

"I did not use logic based on common sense to arrive at my conclusion. Instead, you should think of it simply as a reflection of reality. If you trace Thirteenth's trail of magic, there is no doubt that he is there somewhere. He should be there." Zero nodded confidently. It seemed like she was hell-bent on going to Prasta.

But what the heck was "Thirteenth" doing in the conflict-ridden heartland?

"It's gettin' more and more suspicious, ain't it? How can ya be so sure that this "Thirteenth" guy ain't tryna help take over the kingdom?"

"Thirteenth loves to laze around. He knows that taking over a country would only mean more trouble for him."

"Then what's he's doin' in Vanias?"

"I think I already told you that he is searching for that book. If you think about the kind of knowledge the book contains, it makes sense for him to be searching in places where witches are rebelling."

"Oh yeah, the book that's *totally* gonna destroy the world."

Without realizing it, I had spoken in a mocking manner. Zero didn’t seem angry at all, merely nodding her head, lending my words an eerie sincerity. A chill ran down my spine. I grabbed the branch the salted bird meat was spitted on, and planted it upright in the ground, where it began to sizzle as I roasted it in the open fire. I posed Zero a question, whose eyes sparkled with anticipation as she gazed at the meat.

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Volume 1 — Chapter 2: "The Book of Zero"

Part 2

"When all's said 'n done, what kind'a book is it anyway? The book ya say can 'destroy the world'."

Zero managed to wrench her gaze away from the browning meat and faced me, breaking into a conceited smile.

"It was written in unfading ink, on parchment perfumed with the finest incense. It was bound with ebony polished to the point that you could see your reflection in it, hinged with gold, and embellished in unsurpassable detail. After an initial glance, anyone would—"

"I ain't askin' 'bout what it looks like! I'm askin' 'bout what it says!"

No, the book's appearance would be useful to know since we were looking for it, but it wasn't what I wanted to hear about. Zero's expression turned sour. "It really is a magnificent book," she muttered in complaint. "I don't think you would be able to wrap your head around the content even if I explained it…"

"If ya can't make someone understand even after explainin', then it was probably a third-rate explanation, eh?"

Zero stared at me silently. Likewise, I silently stared at her. We glared at each other, briefly—

"How much do you know about the study of sorcery?" she suddenly asked. It seemed that I had won the stare-down.

"I dunno 'bout the specifics an' such, but… somethin' about summonin' demons and doin' mystical stuff, right?"

"Well, you are correct about that. But do you know by what means?"

"By drawin' a summoning circle, chantin' some spell, and performin' a sacrifice." I answered without hesitation, and Zero nodded with satisfaction.

"Right again. We then negotiate with the summoned demon to perform supernatural tasks. That is essentially sorcery."

Even to people unfamiliar with sorcery, this was common knowledge, found everywhere from the church's preaching to children's books. This was because witches were playing very active roles as villains in today's culture.

"Now, those arrows of light that attacked you last night—I called those 'Staim'. What did you think after seeing them?"

I was a bit confused. Zero laughed when I remained silent.

"There's no need to overthink it. You were stunned, I assume?"

“Ah, well…hmm…yeah.”

“Humans would be stunned, mercenary, because it was completely unexpected. Because they subconsciously believe that something like that could never happen.”

For sure, the “arrows of light” that the hostile witch had used and the “suddenly appearing earthen box” that Zero had created had both made me revise what I thought I knew about sorcery. I didn’t recall seeing the hostile witch drawing summoning circles while she walked, and neither had I seen her offer up any sacrifices. Naturally, I hadn’t seen any demons either. I had heard rumors that Vanias’ witches had recently started using sorcery of an unknown nature, but what I had seen had proven to be beyond my imagination.

“So my common sense was wrong?”

“It’s the other way around. Your common sense was simply misled. Strictly speaking, ‘Staim’ is not sorcery.”

“It…it ain’t sorcery?”

What the heck it is then? Before I could say a word, Zero answered my thought.

“Yes, it is not sorcery. It is ‘magic’.”

“Ma…jick…? Wha…”

I repeated the unfamiliar word back to her, but silently forming the word over and over with my mouth wasn’t getting me any closer to its meaning. Zero burst out laughing. *Was I making a really weird face just now?*

“What the hell’re ya laughin’ at?!”

“Oh—I was just thinking that, for a supposedly violent and fierce mercenary, you were actually making a pretty cute face just now.”

“C-cute—?! Yer callin’ me…!”

“Don’t be so embarrassed, mercenary; you’re getting cuter by the second. I can barely hold myself back from hugging you.”

To a mercenary like me, being apprehended and called cute was unbelievably insulting.

To soothe my discontent, I sprinkled some crushed dried herbs and salt on the meat, which had begun emitting a mouthwatering smell. The fire crackled and spat yellow sparks as some salt fell in.

“Even though it does not concern you, I will still give you a proper elucidation. After all, it would sully the name ‘the witch of earth and darkness’ to be thought of as ‘third-rate’. But before I discuss the details of magic, I must share some preliminary knowledge with you first. I’m talking about understanding what sorcery is, of course. If you don’t know how sorcery works, then I won’t be able to explain magic to you.”

Zero picked up a tree branch and began engraving strange symbols into the ground. After finishing one glyph, she would move on to the next—until, in front of my eyes, a circle composed of many, many markings was formed.

“—A summoning circle?”

“Correct. A summoning circle is required for the summoning of demons. Witches consider summoning circles to be sacred ground. They possess the ability to amplify the power of witches’ spirits and are essential for witches to protect themselves from any demons they summon.”

Zero circumscribed the ring of glyphs with a single circular line. It was so perfectly round that there was no way a human could have drawn it with a tree branch. There were four smaller circles inside the outer circle, evenly spaced away from one another, and crammed with minuscule letters and symbols I could neither read nor understand.

“Protectin’ themselves from demons? Do the demons attack ‘em or somethin’?”

“Far from attacking; if there is any imperfection in the summoning circle, the demon will *devour* the witch. That is why all witches master the art of drawing summoning circles before anything else. Perfect circles, perfect lines, perfect calligraphy. If you cannot master those techniques, it is impossible to become a witch.”

“Ain’t that riskin’ your life then?”

“Yes…summoning demons is always a risky business.” Zero declared, finishing the summoning circle.

Don’t tell me she’s actually gonna use… with that, I looked at Zero with terror.

“Wait! No way…you gonna summon a demon?!”

“Exactly. Well, just watch. I feel like you’ll find it fairly interesting.”

Ignoring my pleas for her to stop, Zero held out her hands toward the summoning circle and began to mutter, chanting out a spell. I wanted to stop her, but at the same time I was afraid of messing up the sorcery somehow and causing something bad to happen. I half-rose to my feet, ready to escape at a moment’s notice. However, I couldn’t muster up the nerve to run, so I stayed, trembling with fear, glancing between Zero and the summoning circle.

—Around five minutes passed. Zero still stood there, chanting the same spell.

By that point, I’d gotten tired of being vigilant. *Is anythin’ gonna happen at this rate?* The moment those thoughts materialized in my head, the summoning circle began to glow. It was a pale, blue light. Something appeared on the other side.

—*Shit, it’s here. What the hell is it…?!* I leapt away from the circle with all my might.

A second later the light vanished, and I stared at the thing that Zero had summoned.

Its body was similar to that of a human’s, but it was definitely inhuman. It had deep emerald-colored eyes without any whites in them, and insect-like wings sprouting from its back. And—it was surprisingly small.

It’s smaller ’n the palm of my hand, this thing.

“That’s…a demon?”

“Yes, it is a demon. But…aren’t you a bit too scared of it?”

“Shaddap! There ain’t a human alive that’s not scared of demons, ‘sides witches!”

I was standing as far away as possible, so on edge that the hair on my tail was standing on end. Zero looked astonished at my reaction.

“Come take a closer look, it’s perfectly safe. He won’t bite. In fact, this is technically a sprite, even though it is called a demon.”

“Fine, so there might be some difference between sprites ’n demons, but—“

“There is no difference. Essentially, they are the same thing. What they are called depends on the time period and geographic location, but we witches refer to any inhuman creature by the generic term ‘demon’. This includes

sprites, spirits—and gods, of course.”

I was shocked.

“Ain’t it wrong to lump gods in with demons?”

“The Church makes no distinction between pagan gods and demons. In other words, even the Church admits that the public’s perception of their God as being different from demons is simply a misconception caused by their faith.”

I calmly accepted that revelation. I didn’t worship any deity anyway, so her explanation was much more believable to me than there being only one true God.

I edged toward the summoning circle and gazed at the tiny and clearly unnerved demon. It went *bzzt bzzt* like a buzzing insect.

“…Is this guy scared?”

“Seems so. Low-ranking demons like this one are almost never summoned, so he’s probably not used to it.”

“So demons have ranks ’n such?”

“They do. There is a strict hierarchy in the world of demons. The higher-ranking ones possess great power, and have numerous lower-ranking ones as slaves. Thus, if you manage to summon a high-ranking demon, you can learn the summoning procedures for many lower-ranked demons from them. Thus the study of sorcery has flourished and grown like the branch of a giant tree.”

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Volume 1 — Chapter 2: "The Book of Zero"

Part 3

"So, what rank's this 'un?"

"It's exceedingly close to being the weakest. So weak that you could probably crush it with your hand."

It looked like I had been scared for nothing. Still, it was shocking to discover that there were demons weaker than I was.

"O tiny demon—please grant my request."

The demon stared at the branch Zero held out, took a deep breath—and exhaled fire.

Having ignited the branch, the demon looked at Zero inquiringly.

"Right. Now for my side of the bargain. Thank you for the hard work."

Nodding her head in satisfaction, Zero reached into the pouch at her waist and pulled out a small nut. She cracked it open and put the kernel in the demon's mouth. It shook its shoulders and disappeared.

I went from staring at a demon to staring at empty space, letting out a breath of astonishment.

"That's amazin'…it's the first time I'd seen a demon 'n sorcery with m'own two eyes."

"Was how I drew the summoning circle, recited the spell, summoned the demon, and bargained roughly how you thought it would be like?"

Zero blew out the flame on the tip of her tree branch. It had been exactly as I had imagined. Disregarding the demon's benign appearance, the process had been exactly as described in public knowledge.

"—Now, time for me to address the aforementioned book. The grimoire contains instructions on how to perform sorcery by simply speaking the appropriate spell. It is split into four sections called 'books': the book of Hunting, the book of Capturing, the book of Harvesting, and the book of Safeguarding."

While speaking, she waved her finger once. A small flame flickered on her fingertip.

My eyes went wide open, and I stepped back to distance myself.

"This is the power of the demon you saw just now: to start a small fire. I neither drew a summoning circle nor summoned anything, yet the result is the same. This is magic. In the past, I would have had to recite 'Karlo, rai… fire, lodge here… the Book of Hunting, verse one: «Leks»… I declareth myself to be Zero,' but no more."

“Y…ya can even skip the spell?”

“If you have enough experience and proficiency, yes. Now, spells are composed of three distinct elements. In the spell I recited just now, the phrase “karlo, rai” is meant to spur the demon to action. The phrase “fire, lodge here” is a clear declaration of intent meant to guide oneself, and bringing the recitation to a close with the spell’s name and one’s own name is analogous to a battle cry.”

Battle cry…? Reading my thoughts, Zero nodded with vigor.

“Enunciating one’s own name along with the spell’s name is very helpful while practicing magic. As one gains experience, the need for this aid diminishes. After enough practice, one can simply chant the spell silently—almost like a prayer, if you will. It’s pretty convenient, right? You can start a fire without having to keep a piece of flint handy.”

It did seem really useful. My hands were larger than a normal human’s hands by far, so although I could start fires with flint fit for human hands, it was tough and frustrating. Zero blew out the flickering fire on her fingertip as I sighed with envy. I finally began to grasp what Zero had meant when she had said my common knowledge was not wrong, but simply misguided. Still…

“How’re ya borrowin’ the power of a demon that ain’t even been summoned if ya really do need’a summon it first?

“No, that’s not it. It’s just that…no one had ever tried to borrow a demon’s power without summoning it first.”

No one had ever tried…? That meant—

“That’s…stupid, ain’t it?! Then…what was the point o’ summonin’ demons in the first place? Were ya wastin’ time on purpose?”

“Exactly. No tried to stop the practice, so we just continued to summon demons, trying to minimize the risk they posed to the world. That was sorcery. It was not that we lacked the means to perform sorcery without summoning demons. It was more of a self-inflicted inconvenience.”

—They had blundered right at the beginning.

And sorcery had developed with this mistake at its roots. For god knows how many centuries, this mistake had gone unnoticed. I was speechless. Facing me, Zero continued.

“The founding principle of magic is written in that stolen book; namely, the fact that sorcery does not require the summoning of demons. It also includes documentation on countless demons’ names and powers, along with spells and the sacrifices required by each one. The tasks a demon can perform are set in stone, and there is no room for negotiation. There are even demons for doing things like pouring salt into fire to cause yellow sparks.”

Zero paused.

“I call this the Demon Contracts Principle—magic. (1)”

At last, I managed to grasp the meaning of the word “magic”.

Magic was a new technique that got rid of the most labor-intensive part of sorcery, the summoning of demons, and made sorcery quick and easy to perform.

It could be thought of as the difference between summoning the king into your own room to hear your request, and simply writing your request in a letter to the king. No matter how you thought of it, the latter was obviously the simpler way, but witches used the former method and studied it tenaciously.

—But, what if one book were to correct this error?

It took thousands of soldiers to take down one witch, yet just one witch to slaughter thousands of soldiers. But, the Church—the world would be able to overpower the witches, because sorcery was both labor and time intensive. In the middle of their ceremonies, witches were defenseless and easy to kill. Few witches possessed the ability to command powerful sorcery, so the death of even one of them could be called a victory.

But if knowledge of magic, a simpler and faster version of sorcery, spread across the globe…

“Seems like that sure ain’t somethin’ ta laugh at.”

There had been great technological revolutions in the past. The discovery of iron revolutionized warfare. The invention of the wheel and subsequently the horse-drawn cart revolutionized commerce. How was the discovery of magic going to change the world…?

First, witches would probably become stronger. If there were more witches like Zero and the witch from the woods yesterday, then there would be a high likelihood that a second war would erupt between the Church and the witches. Actually, there wouldn’t just be a *likelihood* of war—there *would* be war.

That was exactly what was going on in Vanias right now. Witches, having hidden themselves away for five hundred years, had started a revolt. Zero’s missing book had to have something to do with this state of affairs.

“So, that witch from last night used the magic from yer book?”

Zero dropped her shoulders in agreement as I summarized the situation.

“Was she the one who stole it?”

“No, she was still a novice. I tried to ask her about the book’s whereabouts, but gave up because she was in too much of a fury to converse with. Either way, it seemed that someone had taught her what she knew.”

“Someone had taught her… ah…”

Once read, one book’s knowledge would become the knowledge of millions.

The same thing must have happened to Zero’s book. The remaining question was whether or not only witches had knowledge about magic. From what I had heard so far, it was sufficient to simply recite a spell and provide the appropriate sacrifice to use magic…

“What you’re suggestin’ is that…anyone can use magic?”

“No…that’s not it. There is no gray area between those who can and those who cannot. You will be able to practice magic if you have the talent for it, but if you do not, then you will not be able to practice magic no matter how hard you try. Knowledge can only take you so far.”

“This *talent* o’ yours…how d’ya see if someone has it or not?”

“It’s simple. They simply need to try reciting a beginner-level spell. If the spell shows signs of activation, then they have the talent, and if not, then they do not. If they have the talent, then it takes at most five years to learn the craft.”

I see—there’s no way for this to be worse. Magic was terrifyingly powerful, and those with talent would need a mere five years to learn to use it. There were almost certainly people who would abuse this power for evil.

I realized why Zero was so anxious.

The world really might fall into ruin.

Far from the whole book, a single page would do. It was just as Zero had said.

I thought back to the tree trunk-piercing arrows of light from last night. Normally, to create that kind lethality with a bow, you would need a huge bow, iron-shafted arrows, and a monster of a strongman to draw and release the weapon. On the battlefield, a man like that would be plenty threatening. A *group* of people who could use magic like “Staim” would undoubtedly be able to force an enemy army to retreat with their tails between their legs.

If the group had proper leadership and behaved with army-like discipline, everything could still be fine. But what if the group of magic users devolved into a looting mob? What if some shady bastard discovered that he had a talent for magic? Who would be able to stop them?

If knowledge about magic were to spread, all sorts of power balances would be broken, and that would mark the beginning of chaos and conflict.

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- “Demon Contracts Principle” in Japanese is “akuma no keiyaku housoku” (悪魔の契約法則), and “magic” in Japanese is “mahou” (魔法). The relationship between the two is that the “ma” (魔) in “mahou” is taken from the “ma” (魔) in “akuma” (demon), and that the “hou” (法) in “mahou” is from the “hou” (法) in “housoku” (law). Thus “mahou” (魔法) is an amalgam of the two and can be roughly interpreted as “Demons’ Law”. The term “magic” will continue to be used in the translation.

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Volume 1 — Chapter 2: "The Book of Zero"

Part 4

"That book's a real pain in the ass. Why's somethin' like that…"

"It's because…"

Zero shut her mouth, and nearly simultaneously, I shot to my feet.

Bloodlust—just now, from somewhere close by. Before I could look for the threat, I heard a strange sound and turned to face the direction from which it came. Zero seemed to notice it as well, and shifted her gaze to the woods.

That's it—the woods. Something ridiculously large was ripping through the foliage nearby, heading straight for us.

"…No way. This ain't a joke!"

Mowing down the trees in its path, the whatever-it-was flew out of the forest with a deafening roar and all the force of a cannonball.

The moment I saw it, the text of a marker from the map of Vanias floated to the front of my mind.

—*Warning! Wild Ebru boars live in the woods.*

It was an enormous boar. But even that was an understatement. This was—

"Hell, this thing's way too big! It's huge compared to me!"

How could you not yell when something like this was coming to crush you? The Ebru boar possessed a towering body, no exaggeration whatsoever. As it met my easily two-meter high gaze, I couldn't even laugh. Its ruined left eye and countless scars indicated that it was a veteran fighter who had repelled countless hunters.

Its remaining right eye was bloodshot, and drool dribbled from its mouth as it focused on me. Even now, it was ready to charge. Two razor-sharp tusks sprouted from either end of its mouth. Even a fallen beast like myself, if impaled by one of these, would be torn in two at the waist.

Fallen beasts were naturally disliked by animals. I had never had a problem with that characteristic before today.

Should I run? No, there's no point. Considering the speed with which it had mowed through the woods, even if I reached the forest, there was no way I'd be able to escape. Carrying Zero, it would be even more impossible. Besides fighting, there were no other options.

I leapt to the side as it charged, planning to flank its head. If I could put out its other eye, I'd instantly have the upper

hand—the battle already looked to be in my favor. I pulled out my sword. The sunlight glinted off of the sword blade and robbed the Ebru boar of its vision, forcing it to make a blind charge toward me. I prepared to dodge to the side, but stopped after, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Zero standing flat-footed behind me.

This idiot, why—

“Ya idiot! What’re ya standin’ there for?!”

I twisted my torso, drew Zero toward me, and dropped to the ground. The boar’s cold tusks grazed by my back. I immediately jumped up and readied myself to get Zero to safety, but for some reason, she got up in front of me—directly between myself and the Ebru boar.

“Hm…how timely. I will be able to show you the “appearance” of magic in a real battle. I won’t omit the chant this time.”

“Watch.” Zero said, gracefully raising her arms over her head. The boar, its charge having missed its target, was preparing to charge again. At the same moment as it kicked forward, Zero shouted.

“Meaza, li, kib…writhing vines, capture this boar and bind him! The Book of Hunting, verse eight: «Kabrata»! I declareth myself to be Zero!”

—I couldn’t understand what happened.

Before my eyes, countless vines flew out of the ground and wrapped themselves around the boar’s hooves, sending it toppling to the ground. The creepers continued to wrap themselves around the boar until it could no longer move an inch. It took only a few seconds at most for Zero to complete the spell. There was no doubt that this was some kind of inhuman power.

This was—magic. If Zero could perform feats like this, then it didn’t seem like she had a use for me. The reason for my existence as a mercenary was in grave danger.

“By the way, mercenary…”

While I was staring blankly at the boar, who was on its back and looking comical as it waved its feet, Zero suddenly turned to face me.

“Is it edible? Delicious?”

“Uh huh,” I said impassively. I wasn’t actually sure. It was just that I couldn’t muster up the will to say anything else.

“Oh, so we can eat it?” Zero asked with a glowing expression. I rubbed my eyes, and proceeded to dampen Zero’s high spirits.

“No…I mean, sure, it could be tasty, but…huntin’ is forbidden. Let it go.”

Hopes dashed, Zero slumped her shoulders and plodded toward the boar.

She lightly flicked her finger in front of the enraged boar, who had been frothing at the mouth. Instantly, the boar was dazed and stared blankly back at Zero.

“You’re lucky you aren’t going to be eaten after attacking me, you hunk of meat. Be thankful, and don’t show yourself to me again.”

As Zero chastised the boar, the vines restraining it smoothly slithered back into the ground. Freed, the boar trotted back into the woods, with Zero watching it hungrily. “Well then.” She turned her gaze toward the sky.

Simultaneously, I saw something behind the trees by chance.

“—There!”

I spoke sharply, and Zero made a movement as if she were stringing a bow. It was “Staim”. Three shafts of light appeared in Zero’s hand and bore through the air, heading for one tree. All three arrows lanced through the bark, and a shill scream rang out.

Alright. One way or another, I’d gotten used to seeing magic. Or rather, my sense of fear was partially subdued. If I got scared every time I saw magic, my body wouldn’t be able to take it. Seeing the figure that tumbled out from behind the tree, I shivered from head to toe and delivered a low growl. I had seen that gaudy blond hair before…

“Ya bastard…yer the witch that was chasin’ me yesterday, eh?”

“Mercenary, wait!”

I unsheathed my sword. It was a good opening to strike, as my opponent was off-balance. Nevertheless, Zero abruptly reined me in.

“That is a child.”

“A child—“

I reserved my judgement and scowled down at the groveling blond. It was true that it was small, and one could say it looked like an innocent child. This was the person I’d run away from that frantically yesterday?

My thoughts quickly filled with pity. I gently sheathed my sword, and Zero motioned for me to stay where I was as she approached the small witch with great strides.

“You’re a feisty one, eh? Were you the one that set that boar after us?”

“Why—why did you have to interfere?! You’re a witch!”

The groveling witch didn’t answer the question, but gave a sharp yell and glared at Zero.

“Do you know how valuable the heads of fallen beasts are to witches? I *needed* that head, so why did you interfere?!”

“Because this is my mercenary. I’d be troubled if he were to die.”

“I set my eyes on him first…! You snatched him away from me!”

I was startled.

Did he just say “I” (1)? That witch just now. I thought that all magic users had to be female because they were called “witches” , but apparently this young boy was a witch as well. *Now that I think about it, wasn’t Thirteenth a guy too? Does that mean there’s no relationship between gender and magical ability?*

“It doesn’t matter who set whose eyes on him first. What matters is who possesses him at this time. I wouldn’t give a tyke like you a single hair from his tail. And even if I gave you a hair, I wouldn’t give you his head.”

“What—?!”

“To a pseudo-witch like you who can’t handle a single ‘staim’, it would be an item far exceeding your aptitude. You should give up. With your strength, never mind me, you probably couldn’t even kill my mercenary.”

These people talked about people's heads as if they were mere trade goods. I was annoyed, but it did not feel right for me to butt in, so I stayed silent. I valued my life over my pride.

"That's why…"

The young boy gripped the dirt.

"That's why I need his head!"

The boy got up, yelling.

"No matter what it takes, I must get stronger!!"

He pulled out something from the bag at his waist, crushed it with his hands, and scattered it around him. Moments later, his clothes and hair began dancing as if caught by the wind, and the air vibrated with a strange, high-pitched noise.

"Bug, do, gu, raat—gather, world-destroying conflagration (2); burst and burn!"

It was a spell. He was trying to use magic. If I didn't kill him first, he would kill me. I gripped the handle of my sword.

"Ho. He's going to use «Flagis»? —Interesting."

Zero's muttering brought my movement to a halt. The slight squinting and that smirk—it was how she had acted yesterday. I froze at the sight of her. The boy, meanwhile, spread his arms as if he were dancing, embracing the air. Fire in the shape of a snake coiled around his body, gathering between his hands.

"The Book of Hunting, verse six: «Flagis»! I am Albus!"

The boy cried out. Zero drew in a small breath.

" «Rejection». I declareth myself to be Zero."

Everything went silent, but that in itself spoke volumes. The flames, which had seemed like they were going to explode, dissipated in that moment, and the youth stared at his faltering hands with a look of confusion.

"How…why?! Why, why, why…?! The spell was taking effect!"

The boy shouted as if he were on the brink of bursting into tears. His shoulders quaked as Zero approached.

"Uh…"

"Don't underestimate me, brat. That is mine. My magic. My sagacity, my power. To attempt to wield it against me is absurd.

"What-that's…what are you…"

"The technique of using the power of words and sacrifices to harness the power of demons without summoning them —last night, you made a big fuss about how you learned it from "the Book of Zero", did you not? *I* am that Zero. *I wrote that book."*

As if pressured by Zero's silence, the boy backed up a step. He sat down listlessly, dumbstruck.

—Wait a second.

Zero wrote that book? The book that's gonna destroy the world?

"…Mercenary."

"Ah! Uh, oh, me? What?"

Just as taken aback as the boy, I literally jumped at being addressed so abruptly.

"I would like to hear an explanation from this youngster. What do you think?"

"'What do I think'…why're ya—"

"askin' me?" I was about to say, but was bewildered. I hated witches, and this kid had tried to take my life. We were going to hear from him, so Zero wanted to take my wishes into consideration.

If she had ignored me and continued on her own, I could have grumbled unhappily, but since she was paying heed to my opinion, I couldn't just bluntly refuse her. I roughly scratched the back of my head, and grunted out a short "do as ya like."

"…Just don't give 'im any roast bird."

"Sure. I feel the same way."

Kuku, Zero laughed. The boy's stomach gave a great rumble in concert.

I exchanged glances with Zero and gazed at the boy's crimson face.

"…We're not givin' ya any?"

A few minutes later, Zero and the boy were stuffing their faces with the browned bird. Needless to say, I was forced to look on with an empty stomach.

END CHAPTER TWO

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TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The blond magic user used the (generally) male first person pronoun "boku".
2. In Buddhism, the cataclysmic inferno signaling the end of the world.

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